

Myanmar's Elusive Peace

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Understanding Myanmar's attempts to forge a nationwide ceasefire after sixty years of civil war.

Peace has been elusive in Myanmar. The country has been engaged in the longest civil war in modern times—sixty years and counting. Several initiatives to broker a ceasefire between the government and the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordinating Team (NCCT) comprising sixteen ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) have come to naught. And the elation that greeted a draft ceasefire agreement initialed on March 31, 2015, soon evaporated when three members of the NCCT withdrew from the deal.¹ The EAOs organized their own conclave in Law Khee Lar, near the Thai border, in early June and emerged with fifteen new demands, twelve of which related to the initially agreed text.

These new roadblocks would discourage any optimist. That would be a mistake. The silver lining among these dark clouds is the pressure on both sides for a ceasefire agreement ahead of [nationwide elections slated for late 2015](#). The probability of a positive outcome has never been higher. But it will take perseverance, patience, and leadership on all sides to grasp this elusive prize.

The last-minute withdrawal of some NCCT members from the nationwide ceasefire agreement didn't surprise many close observers of Myanmar politics. After all, even as the ceasefire agreement was being negotiated, some EAOs were fighting pitched battles against government forces in the remote northeast and in the Arakan region in the west. Indeed, even if the ceasefire accord had been signed by the NCCT in late March, there was little likelihood it would have held in areas where hostilities were ongoing.

Recognizing this, government officials have been patient with the new demands from the EAOs. But they want them to be listed in an annex to the main agreement and discussed separately without disturbing the main text, to which both sides have already agreed. For their part, the EAOs, now represented by a senior delegation (SD) of leaders, have instead proposed changes to the basic principles enunciated in the preamble to the main text. The government's chief negotiator and his SD counterparts met in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in early July to thrash out the next steps.

Reasons for Optimism

There are several reasons to expect that good sense will ultimately prevail. The main text of the ceasefire agreement represents substantial progress which will benefit both sides, such as joint monitoring of the ceasefire, management of the peace process, and other issues the two sides had struggled with during eighteen months of negotiations. It is the result of painstaking effort and reflects a constructive and positive attitude on both sides.

At the same time, both recognize that while the risk of failure is high, so are the costs of failure. Not only would a resumption of hostilities jeopardize [the 2015 election](#), it would also undermine Myanmar's longer-term political and economic reforms. Moreover, no one can be certain of the policies or priorities of the next administration. The patience and goodwill shown by the government's negotiating team have won it grudging respect among the EAOs. The EAOs know the stars have never been better aligned for an agreement that meets, perhaps even exceeds, their earlier expectations.

On the EAO side, the likelihood of success increased perceptibly when the Kachin Independence Organization agreed to join the ceasefire talks in early 2015. The importance of Kachin State, at the country's northern tip, and the size of the organization and its army, the Kachin Independence Army, make it a very influential force among Myanmar's many EAOs. An earlier ceasefire agreement with the Kachin Independence Army, signed in 1994, was broken when government forces relaunched military operations against it in 2011—and a nationwide ceasefire agreement would have been a nonstarter without the group's active participation.

A further reason for optimism is the track record of President Thein Sein's administration. Since late 2011, it has negotiated separate ceasefire agreements with fourteen of the EAOs. Most of these agreements have proved to be fairly stable and appear to have improved conditions for people in the affected areas. For the first time in decades, farmers have been able to tend crops, look after livestock, and travel to visit friends and family, all relatively free of fear. The predatory practices of local military forces and rebel militias also appear to have declined, bringing welcome relief to the local population. In areas where hostilities have continued, the ethnic populations have never been more ready for peace: they have incomes [below or near the poverty line](#), lack food security, and have precarious access to basic services such as healthcare and education.

Finally, an important reason for the earlier deadlock in the ceasefire talks was a lack of trust; neither side could be sure the other could control its soldiers and commanders in the field. To some extent, the government has allayed such concerns. Senior officers of Myanmar's army participated actively in the last six meetings of the peace talks. This gives grounds for optimism that [the Myanmar armed forces](#) have bought into the process and are unlikely to sabotage it in the future. Moreover, Thein Sein and Min Aung Hlaing, the commander in chief of the armed forces, have been in close consultation over the peace talks and, according to a participant in the talks, both see a ceasefire as a critical foundation for the country's political and economic reforms going forward.

The Long Road Ahead

Assuming that the EAOs and the government find a way to move forward with a nationwide ceasefire, it remains to be seen if the ceasefire will hold. Within sixty days of signing an agreement, the negotiating parties are also required to develop a framework for a political dialogue, which is to commence another thirty days later. The ultimate objective is to fashion a sustainable basis for peace and stability before the 2015 elections. So the nationwide ceasefire agreement would only be the first step on a long road toward an acceptable political framework that will define the contours of Myanmar as a nation-state.

The gap between the government and the EAOs is as wide as it is complex. Encouragingly, both have already made important compromises. The government now accepts that a political solution will inevitably require a federal arrangement of some form. The EAOs, for their part, have renounced secession and expressed their intention to remain within the Union of Myanmar. But little is agreed beyond this.

The government has demanded that the EAOs give up their arms, transform into a border guard force, and set up political parties to contest the election. It also insists that Myanmar's seven ethnic states accept the 2008 constitution, fully abide by the laws of the country, and recognize that there will only be a single armed force, in accordance with the constitution.

The EAOs, however, consider the 2008 constitution, the laws of the country, and the armed forces all to be instruments of the central government designed to control Myanmar's ethnic populations. Their members prefer the formation of a federal army with quotas for ethnic nationalities at all levels—something the government rejects, arguing that the existing army already includes ethnic nationalities. The EAOs also want other changes to the constitution which would promote self-determination, including the transfer of real political power to the ethnic states, an end to the military's guaranteed seats in the national and state legislatures, and state-level ownership of resources and revenues.

While the government recognizes that these arrangements are inherent in a federal structure and has, therefore, not rejected these proposals out of hand, negotiations over how political and economic power will be divided between the center and the states will be at the heart of what will undoubtedly be difficult and prolonged negotiations in the future.

The complexity of these issues demands that political negotiations are not rushed simply in order to meet the election deadline. Indeed, a hurried but flawed outcome would be counterproductive and add to Myanmar's well-entrenched cycle of distrust. But even if the deadline is not met, a signed ceasefire accord would at least remove one uncertainty confronting the late 2015 vote and, unlike in previous elections, ensure that everyone in the country has an opportunity to cast a ballot. As important, the next government would inherit the benefit of a country at peace with itself—and hopefully use this advantage to build a political dialogue that ultimately finds a lasting basis for just and peaceful development.

Notes

¹ The Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Arakan Army, and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army.

Read more at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/07/08/myanmar-s-elusive-peace/id4j>